



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

A GUIDE TO PROVIDING SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR APPRENTICES

Formal mentoring is an important aspect of apprenticeships; however, it is also informal mentoring – practices that are difficult to formally nurture – that plays a significant and effective role in supporting the overall wellbeing of an apprentice. This good practice guide is designed to help employers think about and provide work-based social support structures that may contribute to the health and wellbeing of young apprentices as they transition to the world of work.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The main purpose of this guide is to provide some ideas for employers of apprentices to provide an environment in which strong informal bases of support can succeed. Naturally, individuals, situations and contexts vary and we are not suggesting these ideas will suit everyone. In fact, a ‘one size fits all’ approach to offering social support is the opposite of what works best.

These ideas are based on a growing awareness of the important connection between work and health, as well as reflecting on apprenticeships as something more than an employment-based route to a qualification. They emerged from recent research with both large and small organisations that are considered to be providing best practice social support, specifically those with completion rates sitting at around 90%, well above the industry average.

This good practice guide is based on the report *Beyond mentoring: social structures of support for young Australian carpentry apprentices* by John Buchanan, Catherine Raffaele, Nick Glozier and Aran Kanagaratnam from the University of Sydney available at www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2865.html

Lead by example – social support flows from a comprehensive approach to apprenticeship development

Formal mentoring arrangements are not the complete, or even the most important, form of social support provided to apprentices. Indeed, not all employers, especially small business, have the capacity or need to formally mentor their apprentices.

Social support can be embedded in the everyday work practices and social life of the worksite. Without a doubt, the broader array of existing structures around the apprenticeship model of learning – when working at its best – delivers considerable and substantive social support to an apprentice.

The study points to employers focusing on:

- *Personal attention* – being mindful of the different levels of capacity, interest and understanding amongst apprentices. This tailored professional and personal support through the informal arrangements associated with excellent vocational development on the job can be powerful.
- A ‘*culture of craft*’ and a ‘*culture of caring*’ – demonstrating a willingness to work through issues and encourage an environment where apprentices are able to ask questions. Do not assume these aspects of your business are transparent.
- A *comprehensive approach to skills development and human capability* – a well-designed apprenticeship model of learning can simultaneously develop quality vocational skills and personal support for apprentices; it provides the context for apprentices feeling comfortable to discuss personal problems. A key support for apprentices is to be accepted as a valued member of the workplace.
- *Everyday work structures* – they can make a difference and provide a setting for discussing sensitive issues. The day-to-day support provided by peers, co-workers, other experienced apprentices, and supervisors all operate on their own or in conjunction with formal mentoring arrangements.
- *Help with career development* – don’t leave this to chance or for the apprentice to do it in isolation.
- *Quality on-the-job training* – not all senior tradespeople are the best trainers; model a culture of sharing skills and provide training alternatives. Recognise and support the individual learning styles of each apprentice.
- *Obtaining additional support* – some employers value and may benefit from having their own mentor, or participating in training to enhance their communication skills and working with young apprentices.

Examples of various sources of social support for apprentices



Enhance social support available through a positive culture of workforce development

Based on research¹ into the nature and significance of different workplace settings, the following table identifies practices of workforce development which can enrich and logically enhance social support structures, as well as those that may limit social support.

These arrangements are integral features of distinct business models and co-exist with a deep sense of humanity. Mentoring should complement and not substitute an ‘expansive’ vocational development approach. Part of any formal mentoring intervention should include the provision of mentors who are formally separate from the employer and the workplace. Even the best mentoring and social support will fail if the workplace culture is disruptive.

Nature of workplace		Workplace type (vocational development approach)	
		Expansive (enhance social support structures)	Restrictive (limits social support structures)
External reference point	Engagement with a community of practice/culture of craft	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• contributes to such a community• actively participates in established or emerging skills tradition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• limits engagement• no recognition or respect for tradition
	Type of skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• broad skills• respects value of transferable qualifications• values underpinning knowledge often learnt off the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• narrow skills• no respect for qualifications• focuses all training on the job
	Nature of skills acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• gradual/phased learning• supports career/skill development over time• respects apprentices as learners• nurtures expanding skill set• has a clear skill regime• regular chance to learn new skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• rushed/fast learning• focuses on getting the job done• sees apprentices as workers• confines skill definition• patchy/ad hoc skills regime• hinders learning new skills
Skills: nature and acquisition	Alignments within the firm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• respects need for individual and company to benefit from workforce development• skills widely distributed• values team work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• workers' needs subordinate to the firm's• polarises skills• rigid role definitions
	Role of management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• facilitates individual and workforce development• multi-dimensional view of the enterprise• respects and values innovation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• controls individuals and workforce• uni-dimensional/top down view of the enterprise• disregards innovation.

Be aware of and encourage your apprentices to tap into the wider social support networks

It may not be appropriate for you, as the employer, to play the dual role of disciplinarian and carer. There are a wide range of individuals or organisations involved in the professional and personal development of an apprentice. The variety and depth of support required will be different for each individual and the people apprentices need support from may change. Some apprentices may value continuity of association, others recognise support comes in different forms.

1 Derived from Fuller and Unwin (2008) *Towards expansive apprenticeships: a commentary* by the Teaching and Learning Program, Economics and Social Research Council, London.

Employers need to remind the apprentice that there are others available to help. Encourage them to tap into these networks and to ask questions. Instilling confidence is a big part of the equation. Even when internal support structures function well, employers should encourage a safe environment away from the workplace where sensitive issues, such as those concerning mental health, can be discussed.

Extend the role and purpose of induction practices by tapping into other personal development opportunities

Apprentices appreciate assistance with or a greater awareness of developing life skills. This covers matters such as healthy living, cooking, communication, punctuality, personal appearance and financial matters, including the importance of savings. It includes topics such as drugs and alcohol, as well as mental health and grief management. Think about including these additional personal development opportunities and how apprentices can seek assistance during induction practices.

Helplines and personal development resources

beyondblue is the national initiative to raise awareness of anxiety and depression, providing resources for recovery, management and resilience. beyondblue provides information resources on depression and anxiety, free of charge, to the Australian community 1300 224 636, <<https://www.beyondblue.org.au>>.

headspace provides a free and online and telephone service that support young people aged between 12 and 25 years of age and their families 1800 650 890, <www.headspace.org.au>.

Heads Up is an initiative developed by beyondblue in collaboration with the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance. The Heads Up website provides a ‘one stop shop’ for free, simple and practical information and resources to manage a broad range of mental health issues, for individuals at all levels within a workplace, and for organisations of all sizes and across all industries <www.headsup.org.au>.

LIFE Communications is a National Suicide Prevention Strategy project managed by On the Line on behalf of the Department of Health <<http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/Training.html>>.

MATES in Construction is a charity established in 2008 to reduce the high level of suicide among Australian construction workers. They are independent of employers and unions and never work directly for a particular employer, but for the construction industry generally. The **Life Skills Tool Box** is a training program aimed at building resilience and emotional wellbeing within the apprentice (available in some states/territories through MATES in Construction) <<http://matesinconstruction.org.au>>.

MensLine Australia provides a free and confidential service dedicated to supporting men with family and relationship issues 1300 78 99 78, <www.mensline.org.au>.

OzHelp Foundation provides a range of services and resources to support men in workplaces to be more resilient and confident in meeting life’s challenges <<https://ozhelp.org.au>>.



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